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Beyond the call of duty

How can interpreters prepare for unreasonable demands and deal with the emotional fallout from traumatic work? Eneida García Villanueva considers interpreter ethics with a focus on public sector work

Public service interpreters (PSIs) are concerned with facilitating communication between public service providers ('providers') and their 'users' with limited or no English proficiency. PSIs are bound by the codes of conduct of the professional bodies they belong to, and any code or standards imposed by the public service and/or agency they are engaged with. There are four elements common to almost every code of ethics in use worldwide: confidentiality, impartiality, professionalism and accuracy. In reality, interpreters have to use such codes with flexibility, adopting a broader ethical approach in order to overcome the dilemmas that arise. Sometimes this can only be achieved by using our own morality and common sense to find bespoke solutions to the situations that develop. This forms the basis of professional behaviour.

So what happens when our codes of conduct don't provide answers to the dilemmas we face? How should we deal with the emotional burden associated with certain assignments? How do we overcome situations that are not best practice? PSIs often feel that they cannot turn to colleagues or family members as that would breach confidentiality. While this is true, our mental wellbeing cannot and should not be neglected.

I once found myself simultaneously dealing with cases of child abuse, rape and a terminally ill young person. Despite my extensive ethical, linguistic and cultural training, I struggled to recover my emotional balance at the end of the working day. This was compounded by the service providers making demands that were unsuitable for the training I had received and the role I was hired to perform.

On one occasion, when the job finished early, I was asked to stay in the palliative unit with the patient's family in case they needed anything. This was difficult to refuse, as the client was still paying me for my time. You can imagine the desperation of a family in that situation and my inability to avoid engaging in conversation. As a result, I found it difficult to leave behind the emotional weight when leaving the hospital.

Seeking support

A contingency plan is crucial when dealing with such inappropriate demands, or struggling to fully detach yourself from a distressing assignment. If you have been hired by an agency,¹ it is important to express your concerns to your agency contact or project manager, seeking support and guidance, which can offer some relief while preserving confidentiality. If the agency intervenes it is unlikely that any further unsuitable demands will be made.

If you have been hired by the service provider directly, it is important that you are tactful, consistent and coherent in your approach. Bear in mind that the person who has asked you to overstep the boundaries of your role may not have worked with an interpreter before. It is important to listen to their expectations and explain whether or not these fit within the interpreter's role, focusing on your lack of training to take on any tasks beyond those of an interpreter.

Talking to the public service provider can even amount to free expert CPD (continuing

professional development) and training. Debriefing sessions with a psychiatrist or dedicated counselling are also usually available when working with health services. Sometimes, the parties involved refuse to respect your role, or fail to understand it. In that case, the best course of action is to make yourself unavailable during breaks: go to the cafeteria, read a book or do a puzzle.

A number of simple physical techniques can help us to cope with mental trauma. Doing relaxation exercises, walking and dancing is a magic cure for me. I have colleagues who run, go to the gym and weave. I also find it useful to have a routine: I stretch and do some light reading to switch off at the end of the day.

Anticipating difficult situations

But how to anticipate and protect ourselves from uncomfortable situations? There are a few steps to follow in order to ensure impartiality, mitigate the rise of moral dilemmas and fulfil the PSI's role. Firstly, it is paramount to introduce yourself at the start and explain why you are there. Users often mistake the interpreter for a friend due to their shared language and culture. A short introduction explaining what an interpreter does and reinforcing that we are impartial, we interpret everything that is said (and therefore cannot keep secrets) and that the information shared remains confidential, helps to manage expectations for every party involved. This should be done at the beginning of every assignment. During appointments that have some degree of urgency, for example in a mental health hospital or resuscitation room, it can be impossible to make the relevant introductions and set expectations straightaway, but this should then be done as soon as the emergency has been dealt with. For new interpreters, it might be useful to compose and practise a short introduction in advance.

Some providers downgrade the work of the interpreter by establishing a hidden hierarchy, displacing the interpreter by assigning them tasks outside their remit. When a service provider asks an interpreter to take on an aspects of their own role (e.g. making a phone call, requesting a sight translation or completing questionnaires in their absence), they are removing the user's right to understand by denying them the right to ask questions. This places service users at the bottom of the hidden hierarchy with the service providers at the top.

The interpreter should not walk even one step in the shoes of another professional. For the sake of advancing the profession and ensuring that it gains the status and recognition it deserves, PSIs have to exercise responsibility in training those they work with. A gentle and timely response to inappropriate requests helps every party involved to work effectively together.

A recent study exploring how new arrivals from Syria are settling in Edinburgh concluded that during training for interpreters, and while briefing them, it should be reinforced that counselling (including specialist post-traumatic stress counselling) is available for interpreters.² The majority of interpreters participating in this study admitted to developing a personal relationship with users. Far from advocating this, I believe it important to remind ourselves that our role as PSIs is to interpret; more precisely, to interpret well while upholding the principles and guidelines set out in our codes of practice and ethics. When our codes don't provide a straightforward answer, our own principles and judgement might be the key to success. There is no broad consensus on a definition of the ethics of interpreting, but it is important to be consistent, firm and prepared, and not to let anyone increase your workload with tasks alien to your training and expertise. We aren't human rights activists, advocates or mediators – we are *just* interpreters.

Notes

1 In Scotland, where I work, private agencies (with some isolated exceptions) hold the Scottish Government framework contract for language provision and, as such, they rule

the market

2 Weir, KE, Wilson, SJ and Gorman, DR (2017) 'The Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme: Evaluation of Edinburgh's reception arrangements'. In *Journal of Public Health*, pp.1-10